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## Terrorism Revisited

Tomas Valasek \*

**Theme:** One of the desired effects of the Madrid bombing seems to have been to splinter the Western alliance. The allies must see through the trap, acknowledge mistakes, produce a stricter definition of the threat of terrorism and create a new strategy for fighting its sources.

**Summary:** The aftermath of the Madrid attacks showed that the US and its European allies are deeply divided over the role of Iraq in the war on Islamic terrorism. European mass opinion –unlike America’s– sees the two as completely separate problems and America’s actions as counterproductive to the war on terror. To keep differences over Iraq from ungluing the Western coalition, it is important to restate the definition of causes and nature of terrorism and to agree on basic principles. The outlines of continued cooperation are clear: the US and Europe share the sense that Islamist terrorism represents a potentially catastrophic threat, they cooperate closely on stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction and they are willing to go to great lengths –including the use of military force– to prevent future attacks.

**Analysis:** Differences between the US and Europe in the past few turbulent years have often been explained through the prism of September 11. Europeans cannot possibly understand Washington’s desire to change the *status quo*, the argument goes, because they do not share the emotional trauma that fuels America’s foreign and security policies. The logic of the argument dictated that if a similar attack took place on European soil, the allies’ views would realign.

That argument looks a lot weaker after March 11, when a coordinated series of terrorist bomb attacks in Madrid on the eve of national elections killed nearly 200 people. At the time of writing most evidence pointed to Islamist extremists as the likely culprits. Yet, far from embracing Washington’s war on terror, Spaniards instead responded by removing America’s ally, Prime Minister José-María Aznar and his party, from power. The newly elected Socialist Prime Minister José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero wasted no time in promising to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq. ‘You can’t organize a war with lies,’ he has been quoted as saying. ‘Blair and Bush must do some reflection and self-criticism.’

And so must many seasoned observers of European politics; the Spanish decision –and the dramatic scale of the suddenly un-Popular Party’s fall from power– took most analysts by surprise. It would be wrong to read too much into the reaction to the bombings –the voters seemed to be responding to a perceived cover-up by the Aznar government (which initially put the blame on the Basque separatist terrorist group ETA) rather than its handling of the Iraq crisis. Despite a 90% disapproval of the war in Iraq, the Spaniards seemed poised to forgive Aznar’s Conservative Party, which –up until the day of the bombing– led the then-opposition Socialists by a slim but firm margin.

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\* Director of the Brussels office of the Center for Defense Information, an independent research organization specializing in security and defence affairs.

But the turn of events should give us all a pause nevertheless. It points to two conclusions. The real issue is not September 11 but the Iraq war. Despite Washington's intense public diplomacy campaign, European mass opinion –unlike America's– sees Iraq and terrorism as two completely separate problems. To most Europeans, the Iraq war was not only unnecessary but might also have fueled terrorism by giving al-Qaeda a new cause and a new target. Seen in this light, the Spanish vote –which some pundits were quick to call appeasement– seems to have been more of a vote of no-confidence in the US definition of terrorism rather than an abdication to blackmail and violence. It is one thing to want to prevent future terrorist attacks but another to support policies which one believes make a bad situation worse.

This brings us to the second point. The Spanish reaction proved just how badly the war has poisoned the well of US-European relations. The suspicions and the mistrust are spreading –what began as a difference over Iraq now threatens to affect joint operations against terrorist groups–. The frustrating truth is that regardless of whom one believes to be responsible, Iraq is a terrorism problem now. The paradox of Europe's situation today is that it is difficult to argue that the US-led war turned Iraq into a terrorist haven while at the same time opting to stay out of –or withdraw from– the reconstruction process there.

The stunning political repercussions of the Madrid bombings clearly brought the transatlantic relationship to a new low point. To many Europeans, the Madrid attacks seemed to justify all their fears about the direction of America's foreign and security policies. The Spanish election results also gave European governments a massive disincentive to follow their US ally. The western coalition, which appeared to be recovering from the Iraq crisis, now seems more brittle than ever.

This is an anxious moment. To those in Europe who remember the horrors of totalitarianism, it brings to mind the 'midnight knock' dilemma. It refers to choices before individuals who have just seen their neighbour dragged away by the secret police in the middle of the night. What do you do? One can choose to lay low, keep quiet and hope that the next visit comes to someone else. The downside is that those perpetrating horrors are allowed to roam freely. It also means that they may come for you in the future, and if they do, you should not expect help.

One can also choose to speak out, to demand an end to the atmosphere of fear. In that case, one of two things usually follows –if no one else speaks out, the secret police is certain to come for the dissenter. This is the worst of all outcomes. If –and only if– everybody speaks out is there a hope of ending the horror. This, needless to say, is the best possible outcome.

This was Spain's and Europe's dilemma right after the attacks of September 11. Europe clearly made the right choice, joining with the US to fight sources of new catastrophic terrorism. European forces have fought in Afghanistan and European ships search cargoes around the world for weapons of mass destruction that may be related to terrorism. The continent's police forces foiled numerous terrorist plans, including attacks on US targets in Europe. There can be no talk of appeasement and abdication.

But the real world does not offer neat and simple choices. The Iraq war cast doubts on America's case. To continue the 'midnight knock' analogy, the US –on whom the secret police called first– turns out to have had troubled relations with its neighbours lately. When hurt, it lashed out against a party with only a tenuous link to the original injury. And now one of its friends –Spain– has itself been visited by the grim reaper. It was inevitable that a moment of hesitation and re-assessment would follow. The challenge now is to disentangle opposition to Iraq from cooperation on terrorism; to restate the definition of causes and nature of terrorism and to agree on basic principles.

## **The Way Forward After Madrid**

The post-Madrid tensions show just how useless the concept of terrorism is for international relations. As the US author and political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski recently argued: 'Terrorism is a technique for killing people. That can't be an enemy. It's as if we said that World War II was not against the Nazis but against blitzkrieg.' The sheer breadth of the 'war on terrorism', no doubt, is useful in political terms: it allows just about any measure to be defended in its name. But that approach carries its drawbacks: transatlantic differences over 'optional' portions of the campaign such as Iraq (certainly Europe's view) now threaten the cooperation on essential parts of the campaign against perpetrators of terrorism.

More clarity on the nature of the terrorist threat –and on corresponding responses– is now in order. Three questions in particular help frame the debate –and the US-European differences– on terrorism.

### *(1) Is the West Facing an Existential Threat?*

An agreement on the gravity of the threat is important because the stakes determine the means. If a government believes terrorism to be a problem that can be mostly or fully addressed through a political solution, it will be more reluctant to make it a priority and to potentially treat its sources with radical means such as the use of force. There is little doubt the US views the newly emerged *Jihadi* terrorism in existential terms but do European countries share the sense of urgency? Or, breaking down the question to its component parts, will the Islamist militants have a reason to curb their violence against US and European targets? And if they do opt for maximum possible damage, will the terrorists be able to acquire the means to present an existential threat to Western civilization?

On the first count, US views mostly overlap with those of its European allies, with a few subtle differences. Countries on both sides of the Atlantic share a realization that the demands of the extreme elements of radical Islam will and should not be met. In the words of EU High Representative Javier Solana: 'There is a fanatical fringe who are beyond political discourse.' Nor is there any indication that the other side wants to negotiate: the perpetrators of the World Trade Center and Madrid attacks must have known that their acts would kill any hope of political legitimacy for the *Jihadi* goals in Europe or the US.

The allies partly disagree on the role of the Israeli occupation of Palestine in fuelling terrorist attacks against US and European targets. Virtually all European countries also fault the US for the perceived failure to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. At the same time, however, all EU and NATO members agree that the key to preventing future terrorism lies mainly in making the Middle East more open, more prosperous and more democratic. And they seem willing to accelerate their initiatives in this regard (the Barcelona process and the Greater Middle East) irrespective of the status of the Israeli-Palestinian discussions. The corrosive impact of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute on transatlantic relations is thus limited.

Could terrorists acquire the means to cripple the West's economic and political life through an attack using nuclear or biological weapons? The short answer is that no one in the coalition is taking chances. The US and Europe, even as their political relations sank to their low point in 2003, have actually managed to carve out a quite fruitful cooperation in stopping the flow of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The new Proliferation

Security Initiative (PSI) is up and running, and the respective EU and US counterproliferation doctrines read like carbon copies of each other. At the time of writing, the UN Security Council is ready to take up a resolution banning the distribution of weapons of mass destruction and related technology; a crucial component of those respective doctrines.

### *(2) Do the Military Have a Role in the Campaign Against Terrorism?*

The question of the use of force in the campaign against terrorism tends to play an unnecessarily controversial role. Many Europeans react to US over-reliance on military power by creating a security vision based on nearly wholesale rejection of force. The President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, played to these sentiments when he told Italian newspaper *La Stampa* on 15 March that 'using force is not the answer to resolving the conflict with terrorists'. But inasmuch as his words seem to rule out any application of military power against terrorism, they are in fact quite unrepresentative of the view of most European governments.

By all indications, the disagreement with the US lies not with force as a tool but rather its application. The toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was endorsed and actively supported by Europe. Spain sent 120 peacekeepers to Afghanistan, and paid a high price, too: 61 tragically died in a May 2003 plane crash. More recently, Prime Minister-designate Zapatero also hinted that Spanish troops departing from Iraq may be posted to Afghanistan instead, thus affirming Spain's commitment to the mission there.

Admittedly, disagreements over Iraq, which divided Europe right down the middle, point to limitations to allied use of force in the future. Regime change, even as a part of the campaign against terrorism, will be a tough sell. It would be guaranteed to face close legal scrutiny, and potential allies would first need to be satisfied that the post-war situation would not lead to disproportionate chaos and instability. Similarly, Iraq made it more difficult for any country to argue for a preventive strike against suspected manufacturers or proliferators of weapons of mass destruction. Inevitably, one would seriously question the intelligence being used to justify the strikes, and there would also have to be far more clarity of purpose than was the case in Iraq for a wide coalition to come together.

But none of this should be interpreted as a psychological divide between Europe and the US on the issue of the use of force. Differences yes, but of degree and application rather than over the use of military power.

### *(3) Is Iraq Part of the Struggle Against Terrorism?*

Beyond a doubt it is now, however uneasily the realization sits alongside the popular opposition in Europe to the war. The governments that are not part of the reconstruction effort there face difficult choices. Joining the coalition means risking casualties and appearing to legitimize the US war; there could also be a political price to pay at home from electorates opposed to US actions in the Middle East. At the same time, terrorism of the same *Jihadi* mould that spawned the Madrid attacks has clearly moved into Iraq. Europe, too, now stands to lose if the Iraqis and the Americans fail to build a viable post-Saddam government and state apparatus. The challenge is to find an arrangement that combines the European desire for more legitimacy for the Iraqi reconstruction process with the larger need to deny terrorists a new sanctuary. José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero hinted at such a compromise in linking the continued presence of Spanish troops in Iraq to a robust UN mandate.

**Conclusion:** The paragraphs above are not meant to offer definitive answers, merely to frame the debate which must take place between the allies. While it sounds like a worn

cliché, the reality is that the West is far stronger together than divided. Even more seriously, neither side is able to deal with terrorism effectively without aid from its allies. This is particularly true of the intelligence and investigative dimensions of the campaign, and in cases where the use of hard military power might be required. It will be important for both sides to focus on commonalities in the threat assessment, and to craft a joint response.

The outline of continued cooperation is clearly visible. The US and Europe share the sense that catastrophic terrorism represents the gravest security challenge since the end of the Cold War. They worry that we might not have seen the worst of it, and cooperate closely on stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction. And they are willing to go to great lengths –including the use of military force– to prevent future attacks. They also agree that the greater Middle East must be more democratic and offer better living conditions to its young population.

The Western coalition has never been of a single mind; its strength historically lay in its willingness to work towards convergence in the allies' respective strategies. Some of the unity inevitably disappeared when NATO's common enemy –the Soviet Union– collapsed. But beyond a certain point, the growing distance between the allies weakens both parties, and nothing would please their common enemy more than seeing the Western alliance fall apart in acrimony. One definition of terrorism describes it as 'political violence designed to communicate grievances and to have psychological effects beyond the immediate target.' One of the desired effects of the Madrid bombing, based on preliminary evidence, was precisely to splinter the Western alliance. It behoves the allies to see through the trap, to acknowledge mistakes made under the banner of 'war on terror,' and to produce a stricter definition of the threat manifested by terrorism and a new strategy for fighting its sources.

*Tomas Valasek*

*Director of the Brussels office of the Center for Defense Information, an independent research organization specializing in security and defence affairs.*